

It's time

Psalm 119:33-40; Romans 13:8-14

The average person's attention span today is incredibly limited. For this reason, makers of TV programmes and films create short scenes and, if possible, pack them with action, noise and intrigue to maintain the viewer's interest. They know that it is only too easy for the viewer to reach for the remote to change the channel, or to pick up a book, or doom-scroll on their iPhone, or go and do something completely different instead.

For these reasons, the success of a film made in the late 1980s based on Karen Blixen's story, *Babette's Feast*, was a surprise. It moves at a slow pace and has minimal dialogue and, though has many layers, is essentially about cooking and kindness and eating together. Gradually as we watch we are caught up in the main stories and the stories around it as time passes.

The current blockbuster *The Odyssey*, broadly based on Homer's epic journey of Odysseus and his return home to Ithaca from the Trojan War, is a ten-year journey condensed into three hours without an interval! It's a long time sitting. A bit like sermons that go on for too long. I am reminded of the what the late Duke of Edinburgh said to me a few years ago: "*The mind cannot absorb what the backside cannot endure. Fortunately your sermon was a concise twelve minutes.*"

Might be a bit longer this morning...but not by too much.

It is said that when God made time He made plenty of it, though as we grow older many have the sense of time rushing by. As children we thought we'd never grow up and be stuck waiting for all the things we longed-for in adult life. As adults we notice not so much the hours but the years flickering by. We get through Christmas and New Year and before we know where we are it is summer, and then Autumn falls around us. Sitting in my study at the manse I mark the passage

of time by trees - bareness to bud, to full green leaf, and now the first tints of red and orange and gold appear, and soon the cold winds blow the last clinging leaves off beyond time's horizon.

Writing to the first Christians in the house churches of Rome in the C1st AD, Paul is still spelling out what it means to be a Christian. He has talked about the role Christians should play within secular society and the State, and moves from there to the smallest unit of society, the neighbour. For Paul the Christian had an obligation to the State - be aware of civic duties, obey the law, which has a surprisingly contemporary angle where Paul might say don't consider plans to take money from overseas sources to fund the work of your political party because that would be illegal.

From all of that important big-thinking approach to being Christian Paul brings it right home to the individual. Our part in God's mission for Christianity today begins with how we interact with our neighbours, inside and outside the Church. How do we govern our actions and our attitudes to Jesus' injunction, "*Love your neighbour as yourself*"? If we truly love our neighbour, we fulfil God's law for us. Yes, the commandments about not killing or stealing or coveting hold true, but they are set within that bigger context of loving your neighbour. That, says Paul, to every Christian from the C1st to the C21st, sums up what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Then, now, always. How, when attempting all of this, do we manage our time? Because the reason all of this matters is that time is getting on. *"...you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand."*

It matters now, no matter how long the wait since Jesus spoke and Paul wrote, that we continue to be about the business of our faith. Love builds communities. It is more than a sentimental feeling. The love that does what is good to the neighbour is a love made practical and incarnate - in how we handle justice and what is fair. It is a love that establishes equality. It is a love that

subverts envy and greed. Diametrically opposite to sharp business practice and dishonest dealing in our time, the communities of faith should be characterised by radical love and generous hospitality. We see in the work of this Church and the faithful women and men who give of their time to what we do how this looks for us - but there is still room for more to join them so that the responsibility of timely Christian action and generosity and involvement does not always fall on the shoulders of the few.

When we make our promises of commitment becoming members of God's Church we promise to give of our talent and money, but also our time. The gift of our time is one of the most precious and sometimes one of the most costly gifts we can make. Some already make this gift to the Church for which our thanks should be immense. But might others step up to the mark? Not to become church widows and widowers, but to show by their commitment of time where their loyalties and priorities lie? Paul saw it as a priority in C1st AD. I don't think it is any less pressing today. We live in the years of 'not but not yet' that continue into 2026. God's call to live in love, with our actions revealing that love, remains as urgent as ever, both because we continue to anticipate Christ's return and because we live in a world still scarred by darkness and brokenness. I have often wondered what we would say to Jesus if those doors into the vestibule and church opened this morning and Jesus came in, asking us, every single one of us, what we had been doing, and are doing, for Him and in His Name. I don't say this to frighten, but to impress the need for all of us to show what our Christian faith does in our lives and the places where we are. How we handle our time, how we gift it to others and to God's work, is a decision we all make when we come to set the priorities in our lives. The old saying, '*Look busy, Jesus is coming!*' isn't about giving an impression, but of living a reality. Reasonably but decidedly. It's time, says Paul, to be doing these kind and generous and good things, because it is always time.

We anticipate God's future by ensuring that it is part of God's present. It is what the season of Advent is about - the anticipation and the looking - but not a mistily-eyed peering into the future that loses sight of what we need to be doing now. Living the life of love, showing what love in action looks like, is the reality in God's present and God's future, and we are called to play our part in that reality today. It is what God's gift of time to us enables and expects.

It's time. Not to put off doing the good thing or being the right thing. But doing it now. You might know the saying that procrastination is the thief of time.ⁱ You might also know the saying that procrastination is like a credit card: it's a lot of fun until you get the bill.ⁱⁱ Living the Christian life, or earnestly attempting to live the Christian life is not something to be put off until the end of our days. Living that Christian life is for now, so that we are ready, and busy, and doing the best we can.

Last week I conducted the funeral of our oldest church member, who was one hundred years old. A life from childhood given over to caring and believing and putting her faith into practice. A lady full of twinkly eyed fun but steely determination to make the most of every opportunity in a long nursing career, with extended family, within the Church, and latterly within her nursing home. I sat with her in her last moments, and remembered she had wondered if she could have done more with her life, but then she smiled and said, "But you know, I think I might have done enough, I only had twenty-four hours in the day like everyone else."

What are you doing with the twenty-four hours of your life, lived day by day? Is it time to review and wonder if there might be something else, or can you genuinely say, and it's no boast, that you might be doing enough?

This is why religion has such power, and why it will never be eclipsed. It makes us look at the time we have, and how that time, well used, can bring about a vision for change and for hoe. Not just

change at a distance, brought about by governments, scientists or political organizations, but by as in our individual lives and acts. This is a vision of the world in which we have dignity because we can make a difference when we use our time well.

The day of Christ has begun. The light is dawning. In place of darkness, light. In place of despair, hope. In place of hatred, love. God's way to live our lives now. "Love your neighbour as yourself." It's time.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Edward Young*

ⁱⁱ *Christopher Young*